

A COMMENTARY ON THREE REVIEWS

For those who have lived and worked in the South Pacific during the second half of the twentieth century and have taken time to reflect, the most outstanding feature of this period would appear to be the extent of the changes that have taken place. Both the pace and the nature of change have been remarkable. Through the medium of communications alone, changes that have been wrought in the lifestyle of the islands have been breathtaking. This is what *Pacific 2010* is concerned with, change—rapid and often unexpected change, usually the result of external influences and often bringing results whose consequences are not always welcome. *Pacific 2010* is also about people and the way they, and more particularly their grandchildren, may be affected by changes now occurring in the region.

Pacific 2010 is not a textbook on the demography of the Pacific and to the reviewers must represent something of an enigma. As a result, each of them to varying degrees has taken Rowan Callick to task for his “doomsday scenario,” which portrays a Pacific that fails to recognize the need for care in the management of future and inevitable change in the region. Those who take the trouble to read all of Callick’s challenging “think piece” could but agree with him that while there is a possibility of a Pacific in social and economic disarray, such a disaster can be averted by adopting “appropriate domestic policies,” thereby avoiding the fate of nations with less perspicacious leaders.

Let me here put to rest any concern of readers that *Pacific 2010* is, as Hayes suggests, a vehicle for the support of “structural adjustment policies” of the sort espoused by the World Bank. It is our strongly held belief that policy matters are the concern of the leaders of Pacific countries. On the other hand, we also believe there is an important role for those with the interests of the region at heart to draw the attention of the leaders to issues that may well affect the well-being of future generations. This view was the genesis of *Pacific 2010*, when, at a seminar in 1992 to review the demographic projections forming the foundation of the project, a group of professional Islanders was asked, Do these levels of population growth cause you any concern for the next generations? The answer, very much in the affirmative, led to the formulation of a further stage of the project; but more of that later.

Yes Peter Pirie, we have heard of the “distinguished members of the Institute of Advanced Studies” who wrote on population issues in Polynesia and Melanesia three or four decades ago, and we respect their work. But times are changing, and we believe it is now more appropriate for Islanders, though categorized by one reviewer as “students,” to be closely involved in seeking to assess the likely future levels of island populations and the implications these might have for their children. In addition to undertaking the technical work associated with these projections, representatives of a number of island governments were involved in the identification and conduct of subsequent studies that now make up the project *Pacific 2010*.

A matter of no little consolation is that although the population sections of *Pacific 2010* "add little to what is already known to Pacific planners and demographers" (Hayes) they appear to have been accepted by the reviewers as technically realistic. There is some, not unreasonable, comment on such issues as fertility rates and the prospect that "these populations will be near completing their demographic transitions" (Pirie) by the year 2010. But even Hayes, for all his criticism of other aspects of the book, concedes "The assumptions used in this book are generally defensible and for the most part err on the side of caution." The importance of these conclusions is that the economic analysis undertaken by Gannicott "hangs" on those assumptions to a large degree.

It has been suggested that the population chapters of *Pacific 2010* might, with benefit to "the serious reader" (Hayes), have made up the opening rather than the concluding segment. But this observation misses the point. Levin suggests that "this book was written to scare" and then notes "and it does scare." There is some truth in this, but more to the point, Callick's piece was written by a journalist who knows the Pacific as well as any other writer on regional issues, not so much to "scare" as to alert people (and particularly the leaders) to what might happen if nothing is done, and done soon, to recognize the danger signal of growing populations—particularly in Melanesia, where failure to manage resources, plan ahead effectively, and cope with growing "aid fatigue" could have serious consequences. But it is one thing to write a George Orwell

scenario as a work of fiction and another to write a Pacific "doomsday scenario" that has a prospect, hopefully only a vague prospect, of coming to pass. This is where Gannicott's painstaking and clearly presented analysis became essential to the credibility of the project.

With his intimate knowledge of issues concerning education and employment in the region, gained from participation in a number of major research projects, Gannicott was able to present a clear and unemotive, admittedly economist's, view of the likely effects of population growth on the cost of schooling and its implications for employment opportunities. It is no secret that island governments are deeply concerned about how to provide employment for increasing numbers of school leavers: do they need to be reminded that it will be much worse in the future if they fail to act?

There is little doubt that the cosy views of Pirie ("present trends are positive") and Hayes ("it would be easy to construct such 'scenarios' [as Callick's] for any country") would be more appealing than the *Pacific 2010* challenges to many Pacific leaders, with whom, as Pirie rightly points out, "this casting of the island countries as international welfare cases does not sit well." Both write of the presumed haughty response of "the serious reader" to the projections of *Pacific 2010*. And both upbraid us for failing to take on-board the work of more academic demographers.

Yet the project was devised not to reinforce or soothe, but, as the very

title of the volume under review, *Challenging the Future*, states, to challenge. Its target audience is not academics: it is regional decision-makers and officials. Hayes notes of its presentation: "There may have been some concern that the book's target audience would be unlikely to wade through ninety-seven tables of demographic studies before reaching the book's central message." Got it in one! We must concede that "serious readers" may well choose to avail themselves of more abstruse material—but such is also unlikely ever to be opened by a Pacific Islander beyond a university. It would be fascinating to test Pirie's Candidian hypothesis of positive prospects for the islands against the expectations of Islanders themselves.

Hayes applies to *Pacific 2010* the current conservative demonology, with the World Bank at the center of an evil radical plot, here viewed as underlying the "tendentious purpose" of the book, through which "once again the Pacific Islands serve as an intellectual dumping ground for theories long past their 'use by' date," and whose recommendations "slavishly follow the World Bank's." Instead, Hayes asserts that "a free-market economy is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition for the achievement of slow population growth." But this project very deliberately steps beyond the bounds of narrow demography, to tackle not only questions but answers—very unacademic, this—that Islanders seek about how they might improve their lifestyles and find a better future. Perhaps in the circles in which Hayes conducts his research, centrally planned economies remain a viable route toward this out-

come, but this, frankly, does not reflect a view encountered often in the region.

Pirie notes, "Since the 1950s some positive changes have occurred in the demography of these islands. Most gratifying is that there are now several Pacific Islanders working in the field." And presumably, the fact that there are now more than several Pacific economists amounts to a positive change in the economy of these islands. No, the academic world does not by sympathetic magic of itself transform the wider world one iota.

The announcement in April of the axing of United States aid programs through the region, except where it is bound under treaty, has reinforced *Pacific 2010*'s urgency in challenging leaders to devise and implement strategies that can compensate for the inevitable slide in official aid levels.

Hayes' summation that the book has "an arriviste flavor" is accepted as a compliment. Although written by people who are either themselves Islanders or have spent considerable periods living in the islands, the book needed to communicate freshly and vigorously, rather than as the product of tired, narrow, traditional channels. And the project's considerable early impact appears to be proving the point.

Whether the strategies advocated by the World Bank are right or wrong is not a matter for debate here; what is important is that policies are developed that take into account the needs of not only the present but also future generations. *Pacific 2010* was designed, as the Foreword indicated, to provide a basis for more detailed studies in a discreet range of topics

that were identified by our island colleagues as important in the determination of long-term strategies to cater for the next generations. So far, five studies that focus on Melanesia have been completed, and the results published in the case of three: urbanization, women and education, and agriculture. Publications on health and the environment will follow. Overarching all five studies is an issues paper that identifies the principal matters seen by the authors and our island colleagues as requiring attention. To a very limited degree are policy prescriptions offered, not because of a reluctance to "stand up and be counted" insofar as confidence in the results of the studies are concerned, but in recognition of the strongly expressed views of our island colleagues that "these are our problems and while we welcome help in their identification it is we who must find the proper solutions and we, with the help of our friends, must see to their implementation or our children will suffer."

In their summing up the reviewers reached quite differing conclusions. Levin came nearest to our own objectives when he wrote "as a source for discussion this book succeeds," a sentiment we believe is echoed by regional leaders. Pirie, too, echoes our hopes when he suggests that "Rowan Callick's nightmare is not about to come true," and then goes on to say that failure to achieve status at the "top end of the 'development world' or out of it altogether" will call for head-hanging on the part of national and international leaders. Would that he is correct, and that hanging of any sort will be uncalled for. Finally, Hayes agrees that

population growth will present challenges for governments of Pacific countries, but "whether this book provides the right policy tools to assist them in their important task is doubtful." To that I echo "Amen," as the book makes no pretence at offering policy formulations; it offers no solutions to the challenge of population growth because this is a matter for those with direct responsibility. What we sought to do in *Pacific 2010* and companion volumes—and with a degree of satisfaction we believe we have done—was to draw to the attention of those who matter in the Pacific, *the people*, and their leaders, the need to at least give some thought to the future and the sort of Pacific they might bequeath to their children and grandchildren.

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Dangerous Liaisons: Essays in Honour of Greg Dening, edited by Donna Merwick. Parkville, VIC: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1994. ISBN 0-7325-0607-7, 412 pages, figures, notes, bibliography. Paper, A\$29.95.

Subscribers to *The Contemporary Pacific* will enjoy this book and ought to buy it. An introduction by Donna Merwick (Greg's partner in a life-long liaison) is followed by an interview and eighteen essays. These traverse most of his geographic reach (Tahiti and other Pacific islands, England, the United States, and Victoria) and many of his enthusiasms. "This volume is a gift to Greg from his colleagues and